

William Wordsworth

(1770 – 1850)

Biography:



William Wordsworth was born on April 7, 1770, in Cockermouth, Cumberland, to John and Anne (Cookson). Wordsworth was the second of their five children. His father was law agent and rent collector for Lord Lonsdale, and the family was fairly well off. After his mother's death in 1778 he was sent to Hawkshead Grammar School, near Windermere; in 1787 he went up to St. John's College, Cambridge. He enjoyed hiking: during the "long" (i.e., summer) vacation of 1788 he tramped around Cumberland county; two years later went on a walking tour of France, Switzerland, and Germany; and in 1791, after graduation, trekked through Wales.

His enthusiasm for the French Revolution took him to France again in 1791, where he had an affair with Annette Vallon, who bore him an illegitimate daughter, Caroline, in 1792. Having run out of money, Wordsworth returned to England the following year, and the Anglo-French war, following the Reign of Terror, prevented his return for nine years.

In 1794 he was reunited with his sister Dorothy, who became his companion, close friend, moral support, and housekeeper until her physical and mental decline in the 1830s. The next year he met Coleridge, and the three of them grew very close, the two men meeting daily in 1797-98 to talk about poetry and to plan *Lyrical Ballads*, which came out in 1798. The three friends travelled to Germany that fall, a trip that produced intellectual stimulation for Coleridge and homesickness for Wordsworth. After their return, William and Dorothy settled in his beloved Lake district, near Grasmere.

The Peace of Amiens in 1802 allowed Wordsworth and his sister to visit France again to see Annette and Caroline. They arrived at a mutually agreeable settlement, and a few months later, after receiving an inheritance owed by Lord Lonsdale since John Wordsworth's death in 1783, William married Mary Hutchinson. By 1810 they had five children, but their happiness was tempered by the loss at sea of William's brother John (1805), the alienation from Coleridge in 1810, and the death of two children in 1812.²

¹ "Wordsworth, William", *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wordsworth

² "Wordsworth, William", *The Victorian Web*, www.victorianweb.org/previctorian/ww/bio.html

In 1813 Wordsworth received an appointment as Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland, and the £400 per year which went with this post made him financially secure. The whole family, which included Dorothy, moved to Rydal Mount, between Grasmere and Rydal Water).

Wordsworth's literary career began with *Descriptive Sketches* (1793) and reached an early climax before the turn of the century, with *Lyrical Ballads*. His powers peaked with *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), and his reputation continued to grow; even his harshest reviewers recognized his popularity and the originality of his poetry.

His success with shorter forms made him the more eager to succeed with longer, specifically with a long, three-part "philosophical poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society, . . . having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement." The 17,000 lines which were eventually published made up only a part of this mammoth project. The second section, *The Excursion*, was completed (pub. 1814), as was the first book of the first part, *The Recluse*. During his lifetime he refused to print *The Prelude*, which he had completed by 1805, because he thought it was unprecedented for a poet to talk as much about himself — unless he could put it in its proper setting, which was as an introduction to the complete three-part *Recluse*.

Inspiration gradually failed him for this project, and he spent much of his later life revising *The Prelude*. Critics quarrel about which version is better, the 1805 or the 1850, but agree that in either case it is the most successful blank verse epic since *Paradise Lost*.

Finally fully reconciled to Coleridge, the two of them toured the Rhineland in 1828. Durham University granted him an honorary Doctor of Civil Law degree in 1838, and Oxford conferred the same honor the next year. When Robert Southey died in 1843, Wordsworth was named Poet Laureate. He died in 1850, and his wife published the much-revised *Prelude* that summer.³

³ Ibid.